

[From the Wall Street Journal, Jan. 24-25, 2009]

WYETH'S WHITE WONDER
(By John Wilmerding)

Andrew Wyeth died last week on a winter's day familiar to us from many of his paintings: snowy, cold and moody. Perhaps the best form of appreciation we can express for his artistic achievement is to undertake a close look at one of his iconic works in this case "Snow Hill," a painting from the height of his powers that is relatively little known, seen or reproduced. While it has been on loan to the Brandywine Museum (www.brandywine-museum.org) for several years, its fragility of surface has kept it from going out on loan to a wider audience, and its singularity of subject matter has not readily found it a place in recent Wyeth monographs or exhibition catalogs. Only posterity is likely to sort out which of his paintings will stand up as his most memorable works, but "Snow Hill" is likely to hold its own as one of the most haunting, beautiful and resonant of Wyeth's seven-decade career.

Indeed, the picture is about marking seven decades. Wyeth, who lived to the age of 91, painted this large tempera to mark his 70th birthday (in 1987). He finished the painstaking effort two years later. There are few others that are larger and as ambitious. The artist was conscious of mortality for much of his career, from the deaths of his father and nephew in a train accident in 1945, to his own miscellaneous ailments, operations and illnesses throughout his later years.

We know that many of his images were in varying degrees autobiographical, and this painting was a conscious summary of his artistic life that was both somber memoir and playful recalibration. Like many of Wyeth's winter landscapes in watercolor, dry-brush, or egg tempera, this makes the most of a near-monochromatic palette, where darks and lights play against each other, and nature's full range of grays and tans takes on a heightened texture. One of his great talents was an intense technical virtuosity in all of his chosen media. Yet even as his admirers and critics are drawn to the magic realism of objects and surfaces, it is the charged emotion, suggestive meaning, and complex moods beneath facades and faces that distinguish his finest visions.

The setting was intimately familiar to Wyeth almost his entire life, a view looking down over the Kuerner farm and the nearby hills of the Brandywine Valley in Pennsylvania. The artist knew almost every inch of the roads, buildings and fields we see in the distance below. Historians and others may argue for some time whether his future reputation will rest on the landscapes or portraits (respectively descended from two of his artistic idols, Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins). "Snow Hill" is unusual in the merging of the two—one open, silent and vast; the other intimate, animate and active. The foreground hilltop, receding valley, and broad sky constitute a painted tour de force of whites, off-whites and cream colors. Its poetic emptiness recalls the stark eloquence seen in but a few of Wyeth's other strongest compositions—such as "Christina's World" (1949), "River Cove" (1958) and "Airborne" (1996).

Atop the hillside we view the improbable scene of a Maypole dance at Christmas time. The seven ribbons descending from beneath the tree above mark the artist's seven decades. In a surreal vision, Wyeth assembles prominent figures from his life and art who appeared in major paintings over the years. Holding hands from left to right across the foreground are Karl and Anna Kuerner, followed by William Loper and Helga Testorf.

In the back right is the family friend and neighbor Allan Lynch, wearing his telltale hat with earflaps flying, and finally, partially obscured, a figure with billowing brown coat who recalls the artist's wife, Betsy, posing years earlier in the snowy courtyard of their Chadd's Ford farmhouse. In this enumeration we realize the group only comes to six, suggesting a missing seventh figure. Possibly Christina Olson, the most enduring of Wyeth's Maine subjects, made famous by his first masterpiece, "Christina's World," is not present, since her paralysis would keep her from dancing. Or perhaps the implied seventh individual might be the artist himself, participant in their lives and unseen orchestrator of this imaginary get-together. In any case, this is a witty and exuberant conjuring of artistic imagination.

Not surprisingly for Wyeth, however, there are notes of darkness beneath the celebratory gathering: Wyeth had lived through Karl Kuerner succumbing to cancer, Allan Lynch to suicide, and William Loper to madness. Even so, what we ultimately experience here is the enjoyment of art, life and creativity, an idea subtly but vividly conveyed by the air-touched ribbons. They contain the most intense colors and free-flowing brushstrokes in this picture. Wyeth once described how he approached their execution. In part remembering his childhood games with friends, dressing up as soldiers or medieval knights with play swords or sabers, he envisioned here addressing the painting like a fencer with an epee. With arm and brush extended, he swiftly moved to the surface and slashed each stroke of color from the apex down to the figures.

There is one more level of meaning embodied in this half-real, half-dream image, which resides in its title. "Snow Hill" is at once a literal description and a literary allusion. Yes, our vantage point is on the crown of this snowy hill, gently curving across the foreground. But its contour also brings to mind the great rounded back of a white whale, which Wyeth connected to "Moby-Dick." His painting's title comes from a line toward the end of Melville's book. In chapter 133, "The Chase—First Day," a sailor aloft cries, "there she blows!—there she blows! A hump like a snow-hill! It is Moby Dick!" This of course reinforces Wyeth's own juxtapositions of black and white, darkness and light, death and life. His "Snow Hill" is a more personal drama than Melville's, but no less a celebration of whiteness, in symbolism and pigment.

Mr. DURBIN. I ask unanimous consent the resolution be agreed to, the preamble be agreed to, the motions to reconsider be laid upon the table, with no intervening action or debate, and any statements be printed in the RECORD.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The resolution (S. Res 23) was agreed to.

The preamble was agreed to.

The resolution, with its preamble, reads as follows:

S. RES. 23

Whereas Andrew Wyeth was one of the most popular American artists of the twentieth century, whose paintings presented to the world his impressions of rural American landscapes and lives;

Whereas Andrew Wyeth was born in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania on July 12, 1917, where he spent much of his life and where today stands the Brandywine River Museum, a museum dedicated to the works of the Wyeth family;

Whereas Andrew Wyeth died the morning of January 16, 2009, at the age of 91, in his home in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania;

Whereas it is the intent of the Senate to recognize and pay tribute to the life of Andrew Wyeth, his passion for painting, his contribution to the world of art, and his deep understanding of the human condition;

Whereas Andrew Wyeth was born the son of famed illustrator N.C. Wyeth and grew up surrounded by artists in an environment that encouraged imagination and free-thinking;

Whereas Andrew Wyeth became an icon who focused his work on family and friends in Chadds Ford and in coastal Maine, where he spent his summers and where he met Christina Olson, the subject of his famed painting "Christina's World";

Whereas Andrew Wyeth's paintings were immensely popular among the public but sometimes disparaged by critics for their lack of color and bleak landscapes portraying isolation and alienation;

Whereas Andrew Wyeth's works could be controversial, as they sparked dialogue and disagreement in the art world concerning the natures of realism and modernism;

Whereas Andrew Wyeth was immensely patriotic and an independent thinker who broke with many of his peers on the issues of the day;

Whereas Andrew Wyeth was a beloved figure in Chadds Ford and had his own seat at the corner table of the Chadds Ford Inn, where reproductions of his art line the walls;

Whereas Andrew Wyeth received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1963 and the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor in 1988;

Whereas Andrew Wyeth let it be known that he lived to paint and never lost his simplicity and caring for people despite his immense fame and successful career; and

Whereas the passing of Andrew Wyeth is a great loss to the world of art, and his life should be honored with highest praise and appreciation for his paintings which remain with us although he is gone: Now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the Senate—

(1) recognizes Andrew Wyeth as a treasure of the United States and one of the most popular artists of the twentieth century; and

(2) recognizes the outstanding contributions of Andrew Wyeth to the art world and to the community of Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania.

APPOINTMENT

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Chair, on behalf of the Vice President, pursuant to 22 U.S.C. 276h-276k, as amended, appoints the following Senator as Chairman to the Mexico-U.S. Interparliamentary Group conference for the 111th Congress: The Honorable CHRISTOPHER J. DODD of Connecticut.

ORDERS FOR WEDNESDAY,
JANUARY 28, 2009

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that when the Senate completes its business today, the Senate stand in adjournment until 10 a.m. tomorrow, Wednesday, January 28; that following the prayer and pledge, the Journal of proceedings be approved to date, the morning hour be deemed expired, the time for the two leaders be reserved for their use later in the day, and the Senate resume consideration of H.R. 2, the Children's

Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

PROGRAM

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, tomorrow the Senate will resume consideration of the children's health insurance bill. We will continue to work through the amendments to the bill.

I want to say, by way of observation, that today's proceedings in the Senate were refreshing and positive. Amendments were brought to the floor, debated, voted on, and we are moving on to more tomorrow. It is almost like the Senate of old.

We will continue to work through amendments to the bill, and I hope in the spirit of bipartisan cooperation we can complete this bill. Senators should be prepared to work on these amendments and vote throughout the day tomorrow.

ADJOURNMENT UNTIL 10 A.M. TOMORROW

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, if there is no further business to come before the Senate, I ask unanimous consent that it stand adjourned under the previous order.

There being no objection, the Senate, at 7:22 p.m., adjourned until Wednesday, January 28, 2009, at 10 a.m.

NOMINATIONS

Executive nomination received by the Senate:

INTERNATIONAL BANKS

TIMOTHY F. GEITHNER, OF NEW YORK, TO BE UNITED STATES GOVERNOR OF THE INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND FOR A TERM OF FIVE YEARS; UNITED STATES GOVERNOR OF THE INTERNATIONAL BANK FOR RECONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT FOR A TERM OF FIVE YEARS; UNITED STATES GOVERNOR OF THE INTER-AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK FOR A TERM OF FIVE YEARS; UNITED STATES GOVERNOR OF THE AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK FOR A TERM OF FIVE YEARS; UNITED STATES GOVERNOR OF THE ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK; UNITED STATES GOVERNOR OF THE AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT FUND; UNITED STATES GOVERNOR OF THE EUROPEAN BANK FOR RECONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT, VICE HENRY M. PAULSON JR., RESIGNED.

DISCHARGED NOMINATION

The Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs was discharged from further consideration of the following nomination by unanimous consent and the nomination was confirmed:

DANIEL K. TARULLO, OF MASSACHUSETTS, TO BE A MEMBER OF THE BOARD OF GOVERNORS OF THE FEDERAL RESERVE SYSTEM FOR A TERM OF FOURTEEN YEARS FROM FEBRUARY 1, 2008.

CONFIRMATION

Executive nomination confirmed by the Senate Tuesday, January 27, 2009:

FEDERAL RESERVE SYSTEM

DANIEL K. TARULLO, OF MASSACHUSETTS, TO BE A MEMBER OF THE BOARD OF GOVERNORS OF THE FEDERAL RESERVE SYSTEM FOR A TERM OF FOURTEEN YEARS FROM FEBRUARY 1, 2008.